

Ask Him Anything, Unless It's About Trump

The New York Times

April 25, 2017 Tuesday

Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2017 The New York Times Company

Section: Section A; Column 0; National Desk; Pg. 15

Length: 1182 words

Byline: By MICHAEL D. SHEAR

Body

CHICAGO -- Former President Barack Obama studiously avoided any mention of President Trump or the assault on his own legacy as he returned to his adoptive home on Monday for his first public event since leaving the White House.

What might have been a moment for Mr. Obama to challenge Mr. Trump's wiretapping accusations, or to assail the Republican agenda, instead became a college seminar on how to engage with a new generation of young people -- and urge them to participate in political life.

"The single most important thing I can do," the former president told an audience of students, is to "help in any way I can prepare the next generation of leadership to take up the baton and to take their own crack at changing the world."

Avoiding Mr. Trump was no accident.

Mr. Obama has decided -- for now, at least -- to steer clear of any criticism of his successor, in part out of gratitude that former President George W. Bush took that same approach. But Mr. Obama and his advisers also have concluded that confronting Mr. Trump now would be a political mistake.

If Mr. Obama were to challenge the president directly, they believe, the former president would become a foil for Mr. Trump's efforts to rally his supporters. That could end up helping Mr. Trump enact policies that Mr. Obama opposes.

As a result, the session at the University of Chicago, where Mr. Obama once taught constitutional law, was devoid of any Obama-Trump tension. Seated on a stage with six successful young people, Mr. Obama was relaxed and casual, musing about his political life story and offering a few jokes.

"So, what's been going on while I've been gone?" Mr. Obama said, chuckling, at the start. Later, he hinted at the current political climate by recalling his 2004 observation about there not being a "red" America or a "blue" America during his speech at the Democratic National Convention that year.

"That was an aspirational comment," he acknowledged, prompting laughter from the panel onstage and the audience. "Obviously, it's not true when it comes to our politics and our civic life."

Mr. Obama has spent the three months since Inauguration Day on an extended vacation even as his staff begins setting up an office in Washington and planning continues on his presidential library in Chicago. He is also starting to work on a memoir.

Ask Him Anything, Unless It's About Trump

But on Monday, the former president began what will be a series of public appearances in the United States and Europe. His next scheduled public event is a May 7 speech at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, where he will accept the library's Profile in Courage award.

Mr. Obama spoke with the young people onstage here about civic engagement, community organizing and the importance of not withdrawing from the challenges facing society. For more than an hour, he served as talk show host, asking the questions.

He asked Ayanna Watkins, a senior at Kenwood Academy High School in Chicago, about the importance of access to social studies and civic education. The young woman told the former president, "Awareness is something that holds a lot of our youth back from getting involved."

Mr. Obama wanted to know why Harish Patel, a graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago, had chosen to run for state representative last year as a young man. The answer, he replied, was in part that he did not see very many Patels in office and wanted to fix that.

"There are lot of Patels in India," Mr. Obama interjected, prompting more laughter from the audience. "There are lot more Patels than there are Obamas."

And Mr. Obama asked the lone Republican on the panel, Max Freedman, an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, about the issue of political correctness on college campuses. But when Mr. Freedman answered with a personal story from eighth grade -- the same time that Mr. Obama was launching his first presidential campaign -- the former president interrupted.

"Can I just say? I'm old," Mr. Obama said. "That's -- but please, continue. Eighth grade!"

As the event unfolded, the participants were free to ask whatever they wanted, and Mr. Obama invited a couple of questions toward the end of the event. But they steered clear of asking any pointed questions about the current political situation in Washington and anything that might have been interpreted as a critique of Mr. Trump.

Ramuel Figueroa, an undergraduate at Roosevelt University in Chicago, did ask the former president about the challenges of getting day laborers to answer questions for a research project because of their increasing fears of being deported by the current administration.

Mr. Obama hinted at Mr. Trump's aggressive crackdown on undocumented immigrants by saying that Mr. Figueroa needed to find someone the laborers would trust enough to talk to.

"That's hard to do in this current environment, but it's not impossible," Mr. Obama said.

Mr. Obama's choice of Chicago for his return to public life took him back to the place where he began as a community organizer decades ago.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Obama spoke fondly of starting his political career on the city's South Side, where his presidential library will eventually be built.

"This community taught me that ordinary people, when working together, can do extraordinary things," Mr. Obama said. "This community taught me that everybody has a story to tell that is important."

In his final speech as president in January, Mr. Obama also traveled to Chicago and talked about the effect the city had on him as a young man. "It was on these streets where I witnessed the power of faith, and the quiet dignity of working people in the face of struggle and loss," Mr. Obama said on Jan. 10. "This is where I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved, and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it."

Mr. Obama's conversation on Monday echoed many of the themes he talked about in that farewell address, including his plea that people not take democracy for granted.

Ask Him Anything, Unless It's About Trump

Mr. Obama said he still cared about issues like economic inequality, climate change, justice and the spread of violence. But more than anything, he said, it was a lack of leadership that stopped the country from making inroads on solving those problems.

"All those problems are serious, they are daunting, but they are not insoluble," Mr. Obama said. "What is preventing us from tackling them and making more progress really has to do with our politics and our civic life."

Mr. Obama briefly mentioned his concerns about the news media and the extent to which people are not exposed to ideas that challenge their worldview. He talked about the value of learning from failure and listening to people in order to learn, not just to formulate a response.

"Yeah, I learned that in marriage, by the way," Mr. Obama said, grinning. "That will save you a lot of headache and grief. Sorry, just a little tip there."

Get politics and Washington news updates via Facebook, Twitter and in the Morning Briefing newsletter.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/24/us/politics/obama-chicago.html>

Graphic

PHOTO: Former President Barack Obama talked about politics Monday at the University of Chicago. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSHUA LOTT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: NEGATIVE NEWS (90%); POLITICS (89%); PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES (89%); US PRESIDENTS (89%); SPECIAL LIBRARIES (86%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (78%); OBAMA'S FIRST 100 DAYS (78%); TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (78%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); CONFERENCES & CONVENTIONS (76%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (76%); POLITICAL PARTY CONVENTIONS (76%); NEGATIVE POLITICAL NEWS (70%); LIBRARIES (62%); NATIONAL ARCHIVES (62%); WIRETAPPING (57%); CONSTITUTIONAL LAW (50%); US DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTIONS (50%)

Organization: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO (82%)

Industry: SPECIAL LIBRARIES (86%); LIBRARIES (62%); NATIONAL ARCHIVES (62%); MUSEUMS & GALLERIES (50%)

Person: BARACK OBAMA (79%); DONALD TRUMP (79%); GEORGE W BUSH (58%)

Geographic: CHICAGO, IL, USA (90%); BOSTON, MA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%); EUROPE (79%)

Ask Him Anything, Unless It's About Trump

Load-Date: April 25, 2017

End of Document